UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

PROVISIONAL

E/1996/SR.24
30 July 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Substantive session of 1996

PROVISIONAL SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 24th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Monday, 8 July 1996, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. MOUBARAK (Lebanon)
(Vice-President)

CONTENTS

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (continued)

(a) FOLLOW-UP TO POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Corrections to this record should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Chief, Official Records Editing Section, Office of Conference and Support Services, room DC2-794, 2 United Nations Plaza.

96-80890 (E)

In the absence of Mr. Gervais (Côte d'Ivoire), President, Mr. Moubarak (Lebanon), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (continued)

(a) FOLLOW-UP TO POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY (A/51/124-E/1996/44; E/1996/43, E/1996/64 and Add.2)

Mr. STOBY (Director, Division for Policy Coordination and Economic and Social Council Affairs), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on progress in the implementation of General Assembly resolution 50/120 (E/1996/64), said that, in addition to concentrating on the three focus areas identified in paragraph 54 of the resolution, it also provided updated information on the country strategy note process, field level coordination and an overview of resource trends.

An essential factor for the successful implementation of the resolution was the initial interpretation given to its broad provisions by the United Nations system. He was, therefore, pleased to draw attention to the positive actions taken by the executive heads of agencies and to the statement by the Administrative Committee on Coordination, contained in annex I, strongly committing the entire system to the full implementation of the resolution. That commitment was also evidenced in its endorsement of the management process contained in annex II, and a number of specific steps being taken to strengthen the resident coordinator system.

While implementation of resolution 50/120 had been launched at a time of declining resources for development, and many feared that the changes in the system would not be accompanied by the needed resources, the Secretariat was confident that it could meet the challenges of the next century and the changing requirements of recipient countries. General Assembly resolution 50/227 constituted an important advance introducing effective steps for considering how best to generate more predictable and increased funding of operational activities. The three dimensions of resources, governance and increased

efficiency were reflected in resolution 50/120, and experience had shown that progress must be made on all three fronts in order to achieve the goal of a truly responsive international development cooperation system.

Concerning the status of the country strategy note, the number of Government-approved strategy notes had reached 15, and the great majority of countries had chosen to pursue the process. For countries that had chosen not to do so, measures had been put in place for fully implementing paragraph 14 of resolution 50/120; those measures were listed in annex II to the report. In addition, a desk review of the country strategy review process, the programme approach, national execution and other tools in operational activities had begun which would yield new guidance elements for the field. A similar approach would be taken to the review of the resident coordinator system and field coordination mechanisms.

The General Assembly had decided (para. 56 of the resolution) that, as an integral part of the next comprehensive triennial policy review, there should be an evaluation of the impact of operational activities for development. The report therefore provided some indications as to how that might be done, and additional information could be provided to any delegations that wished to learn more about the methodology and possible scope of these studies.

Ms. BROWNE (Ireland), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that improved coordination at the country and Headquarters level was a central part of United Nations reform and should lead to more genuine partnership between Governments and the United Nations system through more effective use of resources aimed at expanding national ownership of development, capacity-building and increasing national execution. The strengthening of the resident coordinator system was crucial if those aims were to be achieved. Decentralization of authority and harmonization among agencies was also important. Her delegation also urged the Funds, Programmes and specialized agencies to support the resident coordinator system with financial and human resources, and strongly encouraged the trend towards broadening the pool of eligible candidates as requested in paragraph 37 (a) of General Assembly resolution 50/120.

The European Union attached great importance to the formulation of country strategy notes as a means of promoting coordination and implementation of national development objectives. Revised guidelines on the formulation of

country strategy notes should reflect the view that such notes should be the main instrument for the elaboration of poverty eradication plans and programmes.

Simplification and harmonization of United Nations procedures was necessary to facilitate and increase national execution. According to paragraph 23 of the Secretary-General's report (E/1996/64), United Nations system representatives in the field had referred to the fact that they did not have the flexibility to revise procedures formulated at their respective headquarters. Her delegation would appreciate additional details from the Secretariat as to how that problem could be addressed.

The European Union had consistently viewed the establishment of common premises as one means through which coordination could be improved. Much remained to be done to raise the target for achieving common premises as requested in paragraph 44 of the resolution and she felt that time-frames should be established for the implementation of that and other provisions of the resolution. There was also much scope for improvement in the area of shared services.

In order to improve the impact of United Nations operational activities in the field, greater emphasis should be placed at all levels on monitoring and evaluation and the application of lessons learned. There was a need to develop national capacities to collect and assess data and to strengthen national evaluation capacity. There was a parallel need to strengthen capacities to perform effective programme, project and financial monitoring and impact evaluation of operational activities funded by the United Nations, particularly as they related to national execution. The problems of monitoring in the field in relation to national execution should be addressed in order to ensure a flexible approach to the monitoring and application of projects and programmes.

The Funds and Programmes should collaborate more on the development of a more coordinated and integrated approach to monitoring and evaluation. The common approach to country assessment was a step in the right direction. While there was a need to develop a culture and practice of internal monitoring and evaluation, the value of periodic external evaluations should also be recognized.

Her delegation would appreciate further information on the role of the Joint Inspection Unit in relation to the evaluation divisions of the Funds and

Programmes, and what follow-up had been given to the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit.

Mr. CHULKOV (Russian Federation) welcomed the steps taken to implement the General Assembly resolutions resulting from the triennial review of operational activities. ACC and the Joint Consultative Group on Policy (JCGP) played a leading role in coordinating that response. While welcoming the specific goals and time-frames for the implementation of resolution 50/120 proposed in the report his delegation was concerned, to see that there had not been any improvement in the harmonization of procedures in the field.

There was increasing awareness of how effective increased use of common premises and services could be in lowering expenses and eliminating duplication of effort. His delegation noted with satisfaction the marked increase in the number of countries where United Nations agencies shared premises.

His delegation attached great importance to the question of effective monitoring and evaluation of operational activities. The country strategy note was also key to national execution and programming. Real progress in that direction depended on the commitment of recipient Governments, however.

In the context of the implementation of General Assembly resolution 50/120, United Nations agencies and funds must continue to strengthen their coordination at the country level through the resident coordinator system. His delegation welcomed the decision by UNDP to allocate 1.7 per cent of its regular budget to support United Nations system-wide coordination and to strengthen the presence of resident coordinators.

Ms. SHAM POO (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)) said that the ultimate purpose of reform was to enhance the Fund's capacity to meet the basic needs of children and to advocate more effectively for the protection of children's rights. Reform was not a one-time undertaking but a continuing commitment to revitalization and enhanced efficiency.

The Fund had joined in translating the broad directives of the General Assembly and of the Council into practical guidelines for action at the country level. The implementation of General Assembly resolution 50/120 had provided the basis for much closer collaboration with other United Nations agencies in the field, particularly in relation to the inter-agency task forces and the System-wide Special Initiative on Africa. A great deal of work had been done to harmonize and simplify rules and procedures and there had been a significant

commitment of staff time and analytical capacity to support Governments and the resident coordinator system in the preparation of the country strategy notes.

With respect to common premises and administrative services, UNICEF remained firmly committed to maximizing the number of locations with common premises and administrative services where such a solution was cost-effective. In that regard, greater use should be made of country-level inter-agency teams in the management of common premises and the adoption of operational and administrative decisions. Country-level capacity should also be strengthened for the conduct of evaluations and thematic analyses at both the regional and global level.

While important milestones and targets had been achieved, much still remained to be done in a number of key areas. First, procedures and practices in the field needed to be continuously updated and successful experiences shared and replicated. Second, UNICEF would continue to support the resident coordinator system at the field level through active participation in all relevant country-level mechanisms. It would also continue to nominate its most experienced mid-career country representatives for resident coordinator posts. However, since its administrative and programme support budget was already at the minimum level consistent with delivery of approved country programmes, field offices could not provide direct financial contributions. Third, collaborative mechanisms must be truly system-wide and country team subcommittees and thematic groups must strive for the most collaborative methods of operation, taking into account respective mandates, abilities and skills. The output of the resident coordinator system, including annual reports, must better reflect the inputs, views and concerns of the entire system. Finally, much of what had been developed at the global level now needed more effective application in the field. In the inter-agency task forces and the Special Initiative on Africa, the United Nations at last had an overall framework for collaborative programming with which host Governments and country offices must henceforth be more closely involved.

Mr. WILMOT (Ghana) said that other United Nations bodies should follow the example of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF and establish appropriate mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the programmes which had emerged from recent global conferences.

Certain provisions of General Assembly resolution 50/120 still remained to be implemented, particularly those related to the harmonization and simplification of the rules and procedures for operational activities. The diversity of those rules and procedures militated against effective collaboration, placed a considerable burden on Governments in terms of time and efforts and undermined the aim of strengthening national capacity.

There were also problems in harmonizing the various rules and accountability procedures of the different development assistance partners, each of which had its own project assessment and project formulation missions. Accordingly, he drew attention to the need to harmonize the reporting formats and requirements of the various donors as well as their monitoring and evaluation systems in order to ease the burden on the limited human resources of Member States. It was also important to strengthen the national and evaluation capacities of recipient countries to enable them effectively to analyse the contribution of operational activities to their development efforts.

Mr. YUAN Shaofu (China) recalled that General Assembly resolution 50/120 stressed the need to mobilize resources and to reform the operational activities system. Those two goals were closely related and equally important. The management plan would no doubt facilitate implementation of the resolution, and he called on United Nations agencies and Governments to collaborate in its smooth implementation.

Simplification and harmonization of rules and procedures constituted an important part of reform. Regrettably, little progress had been made in that area. Moreover, during the process of reforming themselves, some bodies had actually generated more complexity. He urged the bodies and agencies concerned to retain a global perspective so as not to lose sight of the overall strategy of reform within the United Nations system of operational activities for development.

His delegation attached particular importance to monitoring and evaluation of the follow-up to global conferences. An effective mechanism needed to be established to carry out the work effectively and national capacity had to be strengthened. The United Nations system should continue to give priority to strengthening and making full use of the national capacity of developing countries

Mr. ANDO (United Nations Population Fund) welcomed the progress made by the Joint Consultative Group on Policy (JCGP) in harmonizing programme activities. Progress was also being made in the harmonization of programming policies and procedures and work had begun on the development of common guidelines for project formulation and appraisal and for the administration of national project personnel. Most importantly, JCGP partners had agreed on common draft guidelines for the monitoring and evaluation of operational activities. Despite the progress achieved, however, the United Nations needed to move faster towards the harmonization of policies and procedures.

With respect to monitoring and evaluation procedures, the Fund was currently revising those procedures with a view to simplifying processes and documentation, ensuring accountability through the decentralization of authority, and achieving greater emphasis on substantive and qualitative aspects of programme delivery. As part of those efforts, the Fund was developing indicators for programme performance in order to more effectively monitor the achievements of the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). It was also in the process of identifying indicators and methodologies for evaluating the impact of population programmes. Given the focus of ICPD on reproductive health, the Fund had organized a special training course on the evaluation of reproductive health programmes.

The Fund also continued to promote increased collaboration with other development partners in the area of monitoring and evaluation of its activities. It was equally concerned about ways to enhance national capacity for monitoring and evaluation activities and, to that end, UNFPA country offices were organizing an increasing number of training courses for national project managers.

With regard to shared premises and services, the Fund had always collaborated most closely with UNDP. Currently, 82 per cent of UNFPA country offices shared premises with UNDP; the two also shared a number of administrative and financial services, both at headquarters and at the country level, including, inter alia, accounting and personnel administration, travel management information systems, local procurement and legal services. There were also many other noteworthy efforts taking place within JCGP and system-wide, and the Fund was committed to further strengthening inter-agency coordination and collaboration.

Mr. BEN SLIMANE (World Food Programme (WFP)) said that effective 1 January 1996 WFP had been empowered to adopt a programme approach and that special arrangements were being made to harmonize its programming cycle with those of Governments and JCGP partners. However, harmonizing development efforts within the United Nations system and with the plans of Governments could encounter certain difficulties. It was not always easy to streamline the various rules and procedures of the different partners. For example, it was difficult to harmonize the response of WFP to large-scale emergencies with the activities of other agencies.

With regard to common premises and other administrative services, 75 per cent of WFP country offices shared common premises with other United Nations organizations and the Programme remained committed to common administrative services wherever those were feasible and cost-effective.

Lastly, given their cost-effectiveness, monitoring and evaluation activities were an essential management tool for both the recipient country and partner agencies. There was therefore a need for better programming of such activities at the field level and, in that connection, WFP had developed new monitoring and reporting systems and a series of indicators aimed at achieving that objective. The Programme was also an active member of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Evaluation, in which national capacity-building, specific evaluation issues and relevant methodologies were discussed and agreed upon.

MR. ABDELLAH (Tunisia) said that regarding the simplification and harmonization of rules and procedures, his delegation welcomed the decision by the Administrative Committee on Coordination to reinforce cooperation between United Nations bodies through the resident coordinator system, and was pleased to note that a series of updated and interlinked guidelines were to be issued on country strategy notes, the programme approach, national execution, and the functioning of the resident coordinator system.

However, the degree of simplification and harmonization of procedures that could be achieved was somewhat restricted by the multiplicity of rules and procedures currently in force. Governments were obliged to devote too much time and energy to complex reporting procedures which not only posed a serious obstacle to cooperation but also proved damaging to national capacity-building. The sheer number of reports that had to be submitted, the model formats that had to be used, and the monitoring and evaluation systems that had to be set up

placed a heavy burden on recipient countries, whose human resources were limited.

His delegation believed that country strategy notes were a useful means of fostering exchange and coordination between various development partners. He therefore supported efforts to improve the country strategy note system by highlighting the advantages that could be reaped by integrating operational activities with national priorities and by involving national authorities in the development process. To that end, United Nations bodies should organize national workshops for civil servants and officials and awaken their interest in concerted action plans.

Regarding coordination and its impact on operational activities and the management plan, his delegation noted that a number of measures had been taken to strengthen the resident coordinator system. In particular, resident coordinators should avail themselves of common databases to plan, report on and monitor their activities. Regarding a general approach for evaluating the impact of operational activities, his Government believed that the United Nations system should take as a basis for that purpose the results achieved in implementing the programmes of action adopted at the recent major international conferences. Such an approach would make it necessary to take account of evaluations conducted by those countries themselves. In any event the United Nations system should integrate national elements into any evaluation it conducted in respect of a particular country in order to align positions, reduce divergencies and avoid misunderstandings.

The issue of funding was still crucial, and the General Assembly had pointed out that a substantial increase in the level of resources for development activities was required. Funding should be predictable, sustained, assured and in proportion to the growing needs of development countries.

Mr. BRESLER (United States of America) commended the Secretary-General on the frankness of his report, and in particular his remarks on the burdensome nature of reporting requirements.

His Government believed that the establishment of common premises was a laudable goal, but warned against the danger of committing funds to long-term construction projects during the current period of financial stringency. The agencies forming the Joint Consultative Group on Policy should conduct further coordinated programme reviews and identify other areas where effective

cooperation could be undertaken. The Secretariat should also provide additional information on the extent of progress towards strengthening the resident coordinator system.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.